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Marx at the Millennium

1998

Chapter 2

How the "Marxists" Buried Marx

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Marx and "Marxism"

Many people these days will tell you 'Marxism is dead', usually with the collapse of the USSR in mind. There are still several varieties of 'Marxist' who deny it, of course. However, neither side shows much inclination to talk about the actual ideas whose death or survival are being disputed.

I believe that every current of thought since October 1917, however remote from that event it might appear, has reflected the problems raised by the Russian Revolution. For millions of working people, October shone a ray of hope on their lives, while for the ruling classes of the world it represented a mortal threat. However you looked at the problems of world society, whether from a factory bench or from a university philosophy department, whether you sought a radical change or were utterly hostile to socialism, the Soviet experiment was seen as the alternative to the existing social order.

When this attempt to establish a new way of life gave way to the bureaucratic monstrosity now universally associated with the name of Stalin, all forms of thought reflected the failure. Today, when little remains of this experiment, its outcome marks the way people think even more strongly. For many, the issue of socialism is now closed: you can't beat the system.

As I have already explained, I don't agree with them at all. On the contrary, while this may be a dreadful time to try to patch up bits and pieces of Marxism, it is precisely now, at last, that it is possible to look afresh at Marx's work and at the entire socialist project. The virtual disappearance of Stalinism has brought the freedom to question dogma long taken on trust, to ask ourselves what Marx was

really trying to do and even to read what he actually *wrote*. Re-examining texts that you thought you knew all about often leads to quite surprising conclusions.

In a way, Marx's ideas have shared the fate of many other historical figures. The following 'general heuristic principle' might not be too wide of the mark: Let 'X' be any great thinker; then 'X'-ism, or 'X'-ianity, or 'X'-ianism, will be in direct opposition to the ideas of 'X'. The case of Jesus of Nazareth is too well known to require comment. A less familiar example might be Isaac Newton. Books still appear telling the innocent student about 'Newton's mechanical outlook'. Their authors are incapable of acknowledging the historical research which has made this picture quite untenable. It is now inescapable that the author of *Principia*, founder of modern physics, was a continuator of the tradition of alchemy, Cabalism, Hermetic magic and Arian theology, violently opposed to the 'mechanical philosophy'.

What frequently happens is this: the ideas of an original thinker are first denounced as sheer madness. Then, after a decent interval, these ideas are processed into a few sound-bites and assimilated into the existing mind-set of the time, while their author is subjected to the most absurd adulation. Finally, the unfortunate man or woman becomes a household name, and 'everybody knows' what they 'really meant'.

After that, as you pick up one of their books and just look at the titlepage, you already 'know' what it is all about. Anything which contradicts your original notion of the author's ideas can then be dismissed as an aberration. They are now effectively silenced for the rest of time. Safely dead, they can't stop their work being falsified in this way. It is extremely difficult to get through to their ideas and to listen to what they actually had to say.

In the case of Karl Marx, the obstacles preventing us from appreciating his thought are reinforced with several extra protective layers. 'Marxism' is not just a doctrine, but a tradition, not just a set of theoretical notions, but the life activity of large numbers of people. These men and women have invested their entire lives in fighting for what they thought were the theories of Marx, convinced they were struggling for the emancipation of humanity from exploitation and oppression. Their theory was an attempt to give a coherent account of what was happening in the world, including their own activity. It is a very painful business for them to cut a path through the misconceptions on which they had based their efforts. Not surprisingly, many find it much easier to ditch the whole thing.

When I accuse 'Marxists' of burying Marx, I don't mean to condemn attempts to develop older ideas to take account of new situations and events — of course, that

is legitimate. I am talking about the process whereby Marx's essential insights were obscured and denied.

Each generation of 'Marxists' inherited a set of ideas and defended it against its critics. As these opponents were, in general, utterly ignorant of what they purported to refute, their attacks only helped to shore up the prejudices of the 'Marxists'. Particular prominent figures in the movement became accepted as 'authorities', quotations from whose works would decide the issue in the event of dispute.

When Marxism became the doctrine claimed by large organisations, a canon of 'orthodoxy' was established. Anybody appearing to contradict standard texts or interpretations was perceived as an enemy. As happened to Jesus of Nazareth, too, the ideas of 'orthodox Marxism' became bound up with a massive state structure. Soon, orthodoxy was protected by state power, with all its sanctions of isolation, exile, violence and death.

That is why, if we want to find out what Marx's ideas have to say about the contemporary world, we can't do it just by reading his books. We have to retrace the path by which the tradition came into being, to find out how and where Marx was buried. I am certainly not the only one today trying to re-examine this history. Some people want to 'reconstruct Marxism'. Others are also trying to discover and correct the distortions which are now so evident. Each of these people must base their work on his or her own experience. Some of this work is useful, but I think little of it digs very deep.

In this chapter, I try to retrace my own steps and attempt to find my way back to Marx's actual ideas. Let me repeat, I am not looking for the 'genuine', 'pure', 'perfect', 'original' Marx, who will provide us with the 'correct' answers — such a person never existed. I want to establish what were Marx's real ideas, in order to see what they have to say about our present predicament.

Even in their lifetimes, Marx (1818-1883) and Engels (1820-1895) were dismayed to see their fundamental notions buried under the myth of infallibility. Marx would have been utterly hostile to the statement of Plekhanov (1856-1918) that 'Marxism is an integral world outlook'. In fact, only a fraction of Marx's original plan for his work was ever completed. By the time of his death, bourgeois society was already entering a new stage. A large and important part of his writings remained as unedited and undeciphered manuscripts, unknown even to Engels.

The early work of Marx began to become widely available from the turn of the century. As late as the 1960s and 1970s, important works were still appearing. The

difficulty of making this material fit in with the 'orthodox' picture was dealt with by attributing it to someone called 'the Young Marx'.

If you imagine this was a young chap in short trousers and schoolboy cap, consider that in 1844, when he wrote the *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx was a 26-year-old married man with a child, who had already lost one job as the editor of a major journal. In any case, the long manuscript known as *Grundrisse*, written when the author was 40 years old, contradicts the 'orthodox' view as sharply as anything he was writing fifteen years earlier. Marx's work in the last decade of his life is also most troublesome for the 'orthodox' story.

Of course, in nearly half a century of Marx's political struggle and scientific work, there are inconsistencies, digressions and mistakes. But his life had one central aim: to fight for the emancipation of humanity. He strove to find a path to a world without exploitation or oppression, in which men and women developed their human potential as free individuals in a free society, without the distortion of money or state power.

He believed that the liberation of humanity would centre on the movement of the working class to liberate itself. He was devoted to democratic forms and had no time for centralised, disciplined political organisations, operating behind the backs of the mass of working people. He was utterly opposed to the idea of self-appointed leaders, however well intentioned, setting up a strong state. And yet this struggle for human freedom became identified with its direct opposite. How could that happen?

I am not trying to write a history of the socialist movement. By looking back at some episodes in the development of the 'Marxist' myth, I want to focus on its philosophical foundations. Instead of moving chronologically through the decades, I am going to take four slices of history, starting with the most recent:

- the formation of the Stalinised version, known falsely as 'Marxism-Leninism';
- the outlook of the Communist International;
- the 'orthodoxy' of the Second International before 1914, and its relation to the work of Engels;
- Karl Marx's attitude to 'Marxism'.

I hope, by stripping away the layers of distortion and misunderstanding deposited by these episodes, to clear the way to re-examine Marx's actual notions. Three themes keep appearing in the story: the way history moves, the nature of the state and the role of a revolutionary party.

The Philosophy of Thuggery

Since this book is about the importance of Marx's insights for the tasks of human liberation, it is appropriate to begin with one of the most widely circulated philosophical statements of the twentieth century. It starts like this:

Dialectical materialism is the outlook of the Marxist-Leninist party. It is called dialectical materialism because its approach to the phenomena of nature, its method of apprehending them is dialectical, while its interpretation of the phenomena of nature, its conception of these phenomena, its theory, is materialistic.

Historical materialism is the extension of the principles of dialectical materialism to the study of social life, an application of the principles of dialectical materialism to the phenomena of the life of society, to the study of society and of its history.

This stuff appeared in 1939. In my view, its method, standpoint, dogmatic style and conclusions are all utterly opposed to everything that Marx stood for. Large numbers of people, some of them very clever, hailed it as a work of genius. The most important thing to know about it is that its author was responsible for the murder and torture of millions of people, many of whom considered themselves to be Marxists. Although *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, by J. V. Stalin (1879-1953), goes on to quote extensively from the works of Engels and Lenin, and even some of Marx, a vast, blood-filled gulf separates it from these writers. It was an obscene caricature, which raised an enormous barrier to comprehending Marx's work, not just for the devotees of Stalinism, but for everybody else too.

Stalin's pseudo-philosophical document was extracted from the infamous *History of the CPSU (Bolsheviks): Short Course*, prepared by a Commission of the Central Committee. For eighteen years, this volume of lies and slanders formed the basis of all educational work in the USSR, and of all 'theory' in the world communist movement. In 1956, at the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) Twentieth Congress, it was announced that 'historical inaccuracies' had been discovered in it, and it was simply decided to withdraw it from circulation.

This was not so easy, however. These pages embodied the basic notions on which the leaders of Communist Parties and several then-powerful states tried to find justification for their actions. That is why many devout 'Marxist-Leninists' were incapable of carrying out the decision, denying the authority of Moscow for the first time in their lives.

In 1939, the insertion of this 'philosophical' section was essential to Stalin's purpose in issuing the *Short Course*. (He made some other 'suggestions' for additional material, but they were mainly to increase the lying abuse of his enemies and to glorify the image of himself still further.) By that time, the last of the Old Bolsheviks, those who had led the 1917 Revolution, had been humiliated in the Moscow Show Trials, and had been forced to 'confess' to the most fantastic crimes. They were shot or sent to perish in the Gulags. The last vestiges of independent thought had been eliminated.

The ruling group around Stalin felt it necessary to take command of every aspect of life and knowledge. The bureaucracy's political organisation went under the name of 'Communist Party', or 'Party of the proletariat'. The original leaders of the organisation of that name had been effectively wiped out by the secret-police thugs of the 'philosopher' Stalin.

The name of Marx was now obscenely linked with the 'theory' of this Party. In that terrible time, the very terms 'socialism' and 'communism' came to be identified with this monstrosity. But even for those who could see what a falsification this was, the ideas of Marx became inextricably fouled up in the network of bureaucratic assumptions, including terms like 'workers' state', 'revolutionary party', and 'orthodox theory'. The name of Marx, who stood for the liberation of mankind from exploitation and the disappearance of state oppression, became entangled with the defence of the privileges of a bureaucratic caste and the power of a brutal state apparatus.

'Dialectical materialism' — also known as 'Diamat', the original of Orwell's 'Newspeak' — expressed the ideological needs of this bureaucracy. In *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, Stalin attached these words to a set of pseudo-philosophical notions, which became for many people a form of religious belief. It was forced down the throats of Soviet school children as the state religion, and it was the obligatory creed of members of Stalinist parties the world over.

The doctrine here called 'materialism' opposes a mechanically interpreted nature-
'objectivity' — to all subjective thought, will and feeling, which are declared to be 'secondary', 'determined' by this 'material world'. In this bureaucratic script, human beings were cast as puppets controlled by an impersonal historical process.

Not all of them, though. Into this nightmare was inserted a body called the 'revolutionary party', whose leaders were somehow exempt from the influence of material forces. A set of rules called 'dialectics' explained how these leaders could change their decisions at will. The bureaucrats were the proprietors of History.

During the previous decade, even while the Stalinisation of the Comintern was taking place, a certain kind of philosophical discussion had still been possible and, in the late 1920s, a war began between two groups of Soviet philosophers. On the one side stood those who leant heavily on some of Lenin's notes, which their leader Deborin had discovered after Lenin's death. This group emphasised the importance of Hegel (1770-1831) and 'dialectics'. Against them, the 'mechanists' were devoted to 'materialism'. They also cited Lenin: his 1908 book *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Each side claimed that its 'line' was more 'correct', that is, more attuned to the current requirements of the Stalin leadership.

In January 1931 this dispute was finally settled. Stalin himself intervened at a meeting of the CPSU Central Committee. A certain M. B. Mitin became the authority on all things philosophical. As he explained so well: 'The further advancement of Marxist-Leninist theory in every department, including that of the philosophy of Marxism, is associated with the name of Comrade Stalin.'

The mechanists were denounced as followers of the recently demoted Bukharin, while the Deborinites were now discovered to be 'Menshevising idealists'. Within a few years, many of each of these groups were dead, and so were some of those who had displaced them. While this meeting was taking place, millions of Soviet peasants were being starved to death and entire nations were being transported thousands of miles from their homes in cattle-trucks.

Let us bring ourselves to look briefly at the way the Stalinist catechism of 1939 hitched up a highly mechanised materialism with something called 'dialectics'. On the one hand, 'Nature, being, the material world, is primary, and mind, thought, is secondary.' What does this word 'primary' mean? Does it mean 'first in time' or 'first in importance'? Or does it mean that matter 'causes' changes in 'mind'? Nobody can tell, and precisely this ambiguity conferred mysterious power.

On the other hand, 'dialectical laws of development' were somehow extracted from the system of G. W. F. Hegel — who was, however, an 'idealist', which meant a mirror-image of the kind of 'materialist' referred to just now. This was a reference to Engels's 'three laws of dialectics'. (But great problems were caused for the faithful when it was found that, after 'the passage of quantity into quality' and 'the struggle of opposites', Stalin had forgotten the third of Engels's 'laws', the 'law of the negation of negation'.)

This utterly dehumanised way of thinking was now ready to be 'applied' to human history:

The material life of society, its being, is also primary, and its spiritual reality secondary, derivative.... The material life of society is an objective reality existing independently of the will of men, while the spiritual life of society is a reflection of this objective reality, a reflection of being.

Hence social life, the history of society, ceases to be an agglomeration of 'accidents' and becomes the history of the development of society according to regular laws, and the study of history becomes a science.... Hence the practical activity of the party of the proletariat must . . . be based . . . on the laws of development of society . . . and the data of science regarding the laws of development of society are authentic data having the validity of objective truths.

There is a 'force' which 'determines' the 'physiognomy' of society: 'This force, historical materialism holds, is the method of procuring the means of life necessary for human existence, the mode of production of material values — food, clothing, footwear, houses, fuel, instruments of production, etc.'

On this theoretical foundation — the only 'correct' one, of course it could be asserted that: 'five main types of relations of production are known to history: primitive communal, slave, feudal, capitalist and socialist'. The last of these five has already arrived:

The basis of the relations of production under the Socialist system, which so far has been established only in the USSR, is the; social ownership of the means of production. Here there are no longer exploiters and exploited. The goods produced are distributed according to labour performed, on the principle: 'He who does not work, neither shall he eat'. Here the mutual relations of people in the process of production are marked by comradely cooperation and the Socialist mutual assistance of workers who are free from exploitation.

Under the name 'Marxism-Leninism', and with the 'scientific' authority of the secret police and its torture chambers, the bureaucracy decided what was 'correct'. They, the proprietors of 'the dialectic', decided what the 'laws of history' held in store for 'workers who are free from exploitation'. Living at a level far removed from the desperate poverty of the mass of Soviet workers and peasants, protected by a massive security apparatus, the bureaucrats administered the 'distribution according to labour performed'. As Trotsky explained, in *The Revolution Betrayed*, those with the power to decide on this distribution began by grabbing their own giant share.

Is it really necessary to be reminded of this nightmare 'world-outlook'? Unfortunately, it is, in order to re-examine the ideas of Marx. For it became impossible to view Marx's work unless it was first refracted through the distorting lens of this tradition. For example, it is depressing to note that a thinker of the stature of Jurgens Habermas can describe Stalin's essay as 'a handbook of historical materialism'.

Even those who fought against the murder-machine which was ideologically lubricated by this stuff could not escape being affected by it. Trotsky (1879-1940) and his supporters struggled to maintain the outlook which inspired and guided the Russian Revolution and the formation of the Communist International. With whatever voice they had, they denounced the lies and corruption of Stalinism — especially the lie that Stalin's Russia was 'socialism'. But they never had the theoretical resources to penetrate to its philosophical core. The best they could do was to show that Stalinist policies and distortions were contrary to the decisions of Lenin's party and the teachings of 'Marxism'.

Throughout the 1930s, Trotsky, while never claiming any special philosophical knowledge, continually but vainly implored his followers to undertake the study of such matters. When, under the terrible conditions of exile, he tried to continue with his planned biography of Lenin, he found it necessary to study Hegel's Science of Logic. He managed to get through about 30 pages before being forced to turn to other questions.

At best, the Trotskyists could strive to defend an existing body of theory. Trotsky's great article *Stalinism and Bolshevism*, which he wrote in 1937, begins like this:

Reactionary epochs like ours not only disintegrate and weaken the working class and isolate its vanguard but also lower the general ideological level of the movement and throw it back to stages long since passed through. In these conditions the task of the vanguard is above all not to let itself be carried along by the backward flow: it must swim against the current. In an unfavourable relation of forces prevents it from holding the positions it has won, it must at least retain its ideological positions, because in them is expressed the dearly-paid experience of the past. Fools will consider this policy 'sectarian'. In fact it is the only means of preparing for a new tremendous surge forward with the coming historical tide.

But defence of an established set of ideas, however heroic, proved to be quite inadequate.

Trotsky refused to accept the often-parroted notion that Stalinism was the inevitable continuation of Lenin's work. This idea, now more fashionable than ever, actually explains nothing. The false ideas of one person cannot be explained simply by the false ideas of another. However, what is true is that, when Stalin erected his massive historical road-block to communism, he exploited to the full every weakness contained in the outlook of Lenin's party. Unless we investigate these defects as thoroughly as we can, it will prove impossible to find our way through.

Philosophy and the Russian Revolution

In 1917, the Soviets took over the government of what had been the Tsarist Empire, under the leadership of the organisation which now renamed itself the Communist Party. For the first time, working men and women took the struggle for control over their own lives to the level of capturing the state power. Almost without precedent, this movement of the small and inexperienced Russian working class pointed to a way out of the hell of the World War.

The success of this attempt was predicated on the rapid spread of the revolution to Germany and other industrialised countries. With the help of the more advanced working-class movements, the Soviets could transform their economically and culturally backward peasant country, devastated by the imperialist war. Its aim of establishing socialism would be realised on a European and world scale.

With the disappointment of these hopes, huge problems arose. The determination of the Bolshevik leaders to confront and not to evade them remains one of the great stories of the twentieth century. But, however great my admiration for their struggles, I am obliged to look with great care at their effect on the way we see ourselves today.

When it was a matter of the Revolution holding on by all possible means for a few weeks or months, the devotion and courage of the Soviet workers and their allies inside and outside the former Tsarist Empire could be sustained. But when these months stretched into years and even decades, the question appeared in quite a different shape.

In 1919, the Communist International, 'World Party of Socialist Revolution', came into being, winning the allegiance of the best sections of the working class throughout the world. The Communists insisted that ruthless and violent struggle was required to destroy the political power of capital. They counterposed this to the conception of peaceful, parliamentary transformation, to which the ruling class would quietly submit, the view attributed to their enemies, the Social Democratic leaders.

But by that time, the idea of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' had been changed into something quite new. To Marx this phrase meant that the functions of the state would be taken into the hands of the whole of the working class, preparatory to its dissolution in a free community. When this was seen to be out of the question in backward Russia, the Communists invented something called a 'workers' state' — a term not used by Marx, nor by any of his followers before 1918 — to describe the bureaucratic machine whose tentacles were already taking hold of the heart of the Revolution. (As far as I can tell, the phrase first appeared when communists began to discuss the 'bureaucratic deformations' of the Soviet state. There is more about this in Chapter 3.)

Without such an apparatus, the survival of the Revolution would have been impossible. How else could you win a civil war against enemies who had massive support from the most powerful imperialist states? Yes, but with this apparatus, what was it that survived?

I shall argue that behind the thinking of the Bolsheviks stood notions of the state and of the Party which blocked the path to any understanding of what was happening. This can be seen, for example, in these extracts from a book which was widely read in the 'heroic' days of the Revolution and the Civil War:

In the hands of the Party is concentrated the general control.... It has the final word in all fundamental questions.... The last word rests with the Central Committee.... We have more than once been accused of having substituted for the dictatorship of the soviets the dictatorship of our party. Yet it can be said with complete justice that the dictatorship of the soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party.

We oppose capitalist slavery by socially-regulated labour.... Wages ... must be brought into the closest possible touch with the productivity of individual labour. Under capitalism, the system of piece-work and of grading, the application of the Taylor system, etc., have as their object to increase the exploitation of the workers by the squeezing out of surplus value. Under socialist production, piece-work, bonuses, etc., have as their problem to increase the volume of social product, and consequently to raise the general well-being. Those workers who do more for the general interest receive the right to a greater quantity of the social product than the lazy, the careless and the disorganisers.

Just as a lamp before going out shoots up a brilliant flame, so the state before disappearing assumes the form of the dictatorship of the

proletariat, the most ruthless form of state, which embraces the life of the citizens authoritatively in every direction.

Leon Trotsky wrote these lines early in 1920, in the armoured train from which he directed the victories of the Red Army over the armies sent by the imperialists. The pamphlet *Terrorism and Communism*, from which I have extracted them- somewhat unfairly, because their author had many other things to say in it — was representative of Comintern thinking at the time. Each delegate to the Second Congress of the International was given a copy, together with Lenin's *Left- wing Communism*. (It certainly does not represent Trotsky's attitude after 1923. However, I am sorry to say that, when Trotsky re-issued it in English in 1935 and in French in 1936, he gave his readers no ideological health warning.) By 1920, the international isolation of the Revolution was already beginning to have its dire effect on the theory of the communist movement. Lenin and Trotsky, as well as other leaders of the International, struggled to find a theoretical framework within which to tackle the terrible economic and social issues facing the Soviet state. But, as I shall show, 'Marxism' as they understood it already formed a barrier, walling them off from Marx himself.

In his last writings, the dying Lenin battled with the growing forces of the Soviet state bureaucracy, now gaining ground within the Communist Party itself and in the International. The frequently posed the problem of how to 'draw the masses into the administration of the State'. But who were those who sought to do the 'drawing'? What had happened to the idea of the self-emancipation of the working class, and of the 'dying-out of the state', which Lenin himself had rediscovered in 1917? Lenin did not try to hide from these excruciating questions, raised by the harsh reality of the Civil War. He referred more than once to the 'declassing' of the tiny Russian working class in the course of the Civil War and its aftermath, and pointed out the perils this implied for the future of the Party.

By 1919, the soviets, the organs of mass democratic action which sprang up in 1917, had vanished in all but name. Many thousands of those workers who had been to the fore in 1917 had perished in the course of the Civil War. The 'dictatorship of the proletariat' had been transformed into a kind of spiritual force directed by the Party and its leadership, independently of the will or knowledge of the human beings actually struggling to live in those terrible days. Stalin later completed the work of destroying that generation and replaced the Party with a bureaucratic machine. ...

Lenin Canonised

However unpopular the idea may be in some circles today, I still believe that V. I. Lenin was the greatest individual figure of our century. In his own life and thought,

he concentrated the world-wide striving of millions for emancipation. So I approach the task of re-examining his theoretical work with trepidation. Everything he wrote is of great importance. But if it is accepted as biblical authority — and he would have denounced any attempt to treat it as such — it will be impossible to find a way through the confusion surrounding Marx's ideas.

Stalin's canonisation of Lenin was an essential part of the destruction of Marx's method — that method Marx had declared 'lets nothing impose upon it and is in its essence critical and revolutionary'. It is ironical to read in this context Lenin's words of 1917:

What is now happening to Marx's theory has, in the course of history, happened repeatedly to the theories of revolutionary thinkers and leaders of oppressed classes fighting for emancipation. During the lifetime of great revolutionaries, the oppressing classes constantly hounded them, received their theories with the most savage malice, the most furious hatred and the most unscrupulous campaigns of lies and slander. After their death, attempts are made to convert them into harmless icons.

Once the embalmed body of Lenin had been stuck in the mausoleum, his writings, editorially embalmed,} were pressed into the service of the ruling caste. Contrary to every tradition of Bolshevism and of Marx's ideas, it soon became impossible to question any approved text of Lenin.

In the worst traditions of religious bigotry, some of Lenin's writings had to be suppressed, in particular his 1922 *Letter to the Congress*, known as '*Lenin's Testament*', with its postscript calling for Stalin's removal. But even those of his works which were printed by the million had their revolutionary spirit crushed under the weight of pious commentary and lying footnotes.

Bukharin, the Mechanical Revolutionary

Until 1924, Nicolai Bukharin (1888-1938) was the leader of the left wing of Lenin's party, often very critical of its policies. One of the most popular of Party leaders, he stood for the immediate implementation of the measures that Lenin had discussed theoretically in his pamphlet *The State and Revolution*, written in the heady days of 1917. He was also one of the very few leading Bolsheviks who took an interest in philosophical matters.

In 1919, assisted by the young economist E. A. Preobrazhensky (1885-1937), he wrote a commentary on the newly agreed Programme of the Party. Issued under the title *The ABC of Communism*, it was a best-seller among the communists of

many countries. Its Utopian conceptions were presented with all of Bukharin's undoubted charm and clarity. But they make spine-chilling reading in the light of the history of the past seventy years.

This is what Bukharin thinks Marx's theory is all about:

Marx ... examined the evil, unjust, barbaric social order which still prevails throughout the world, and studied its structure. Precisely after the manner in which we might study a machine or, let us say, a clock, did Marx study the structure of capitalist society, in which landlords and factory-owners rule, while workers and peasants are oppressed. Let us suppose that we have noticed that two of the wheels of our clock are badly fitted, and that at each revolution they interfere more and more with one another's movements. Then we can foresee that the clock will break down and stop.... Marx recognised very clearly that capitalism is digging its own grave, that the machine will break down, and that the cause of the break-down will be the inevitable uprising of the workers, who will refashion the whole world to suit themselves.

This way of looking at the world, Bukharin explains, is 'scientific'. Communism, he is quite sure, is a system in which the parts of the mechanism are much better 'mutually adapted'. It will be a society which is 'organised throughout'.

Bukharin recommends the dictatorship of the proletariat as the only way to make the transition to the classless society, and explains that "dictatorship" signifies strict method of government and a resolute crushing of enemies'. On the other hand, he quotes the new Constitution to confirm that this dictatorship is only a transitory form.

In 1920, Bukharin completed his theoretical justification of these ideas in *Historical Materialism*, which remained in print for a decade. He explains the difference between 'proletarian science' and 'bourgeois science' by analogy: we can either view the world through red eyeglasses or through white ones. His 'system' of 'Marxian sociology' runs on purely mechanical lines, which is how he understands 'science'.

Cause and effect are his chief categories. The clash of opposing forces, the resultant of many wills, results in equilibrium. Reality moves through a cycle in which the disturbance of each equilibrium gives rise to a new one. The meaning of historical materialism is for him 'social determinism', while society is a system of interactions between its 'elements'.

Towards the end of 1920, a dispute broke out in the Bolshevik Party on the role of the trade unions in the Soviet economy, which reveals some of the difficulties faced by the Bolsheviks in understanding their own state. Trotsky and Bukharin each proposed that the unions be absorbed into the economic planning machinery. The argument was simple: if the unions operate under a workers' state, against whom do they need to protect their members? But Lenin denounced this argument as 'abstraction':

For one thing, ours is not actually a workers' state but a workers' and peasants' state.... We now have a state under which it is the business of the massively organised proletariat to protect itself, while we, for our part, must use these workers' organisations to protect the workers from their state and to get them to protect our state.

When Lenin was speaking, Bukharin interrupted this characterisation of the Soviet state as a 'workers' and peasants' state', and, in a later article in *Pravda*, Lenin answered him.

I was wrong and Comrade Bukharin was right. What I should have said is: 'A workers' state is an abstraction. What we actually have is a workers' state with this peculiarity, firstly, that it is not the working class but the peasant population that predominates in the country, and secondly, that it is a workers' state with bureaucratic distortions.'

These remarks have often been quoted, but I think they should be examined again. Of course, they display Lenin's amazing flexibility of thought and his refusal to evade the most awkward difficulties for his own viewpoint. But look at how he describes the relation between the Soviet state and the working class. The leaders of the Communist Party must regard the Soviet state as 'our' state. If 'we' can 'use' the workers' organisations to protect the workers from 'our' state, 'we' will get them, in return, to protect 'our' state. All of this is contained in Lenin's remarkable formulation: 'Our state is not a workers' state, as Trotsky abstractly employed the term, but a "workers' state with bureaucratic distortions."

What happened after this dispute? Trotsky became the leader of the struggle, begun by Lenin, against the bureaucratisation of the state and the Party. As the bureaucratic machine strangled the remnants of the October Revolution, and indeed incorporated the trade unions into the state, Trotsky carried on this fight until Stalin's assassin killed him. Bukharin became the leader of the Right, showing how his mechanistic conceptions were equally suited to this new role. After Lenin's death, he became Stalin's chief ally, helping him to defeat the Left opposition. Having used him, Stalin destroyed him, first politically and eventually physically.

A Philosophical 'Discussion'

In 1923, the Hungarian communist Georgi Lukacs (1885-1971), then a leader of the 'leftist' faction, published his book *History and Class Consciousness*. Aimed against 'the Marxism of the Second International' that is, 'Marxism' as it had been understood before 1917 — it attacked the mechanical ideas of Bukharin. It was also directly opposed to the 'materialism' of the earlier Lenin — although it never says so. It stressed the origins of Marx's work, especially *Capital*, in the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel, and it contained a famous attack on Engels's conception of a 'dialectics of nature'. At the same time, a leading German communist, Karl Korsch (1889-1961), published his *Communism and Philosophy*, with a somewhat similar outlook.

A fierce dispute broke out, in which Lukacs and Korsch were attacked for 'idealism'. At the Fifth World Congress of the International in 1924, Zinoviev (1883-1936), then President of the International and allied with Stalin against Trotsky, spoke on 'The Struggle against the Ultra-lefts and Theoretical Revisionism'. He included a characteristic onslaught on the two authors and those intellectuals who supported them. In line with his 'Bolshevisation' campaign, then in full swing, he denounced them as 'professors', a species he counterposed to 'honest workers': 'If we get a few more of these professors spinning out their Marxist theories, we shall be lost. We cannot tolerate theoretical revisionism of this kind in our communist international.' Bukharin, soon to replace Zinoviev as Stalin's ally, is reported to have declared in conversation with Korsch and other delegates: 'Comrades, we cannot put every piece of garbage up for discussion.'

The ideas of Korsch and Lukacs, instead of being combated in open debate, were answered with bureaucratic crudity. It is doubtful whether Zinoviev ever bothered to look at the books he was denouncing. Their authors' responses were interesting. Lukacs made his recantation, the first of many. Soon afterwards he wrote his essay, *Lenin, a Study in the Unity of his Thought* (1924), which opened the way for a new 'orthodoxy' called 'Leninism' — really a code name for Stalinism. Korsch also continued for a time to defend the current Comintern line, attacking both 'Trotskyism' and 'Luxemburgism' on behalf of 'Leninism'. In 1926, however, he developed left-wing criticisms of Stalin's line and was soon thrown out of both the German Party and the International.

The new 'approach' to theory, very different from the vigorous inner disputes of the movement in Lenin's time, was already taking shape. In Stalin's capable hands, this was transformed into a regime where nobody could question any action of the leadership — until the current line had been switched.

In the 1930s, the Frankfurt School, including Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer and others, tried to develop some aspects of Lukacs's approach. With the rise of Nazism in Germany, they lost faith in the possibility of a socialist transformation. For them and their successors, Marxism became no more than an academic effort to maintain the traditions of the Enlightenment.

Trotsky and Lenin

In the nightmare conditions under which Trotsky had to fight from 1923 onwards, he was forced to make difficult tactical decisions. One of them was to try to minimise his earlier differences with Lenin, not only where he thought Lenin's view was later proved correct, but sometimes also when it was wrong. This was understandable in view of the monstrous campaign of slander against him - but it is inexcusable for anyone today.

A remark Trotsky made in 1933 is illuminating in this connection. It was in a conversation with the writer Fritz Sternberg, who had his own disagreements with Lenin. Sternberg reports:

One day, when we were discussing Russian problems, he said: 'Stalin and the Stalinists are always trying to brand me as an anti-Leninist. It's a dirty slander, of course. I had profound differences with Lenin, before, during, and after the Revolution and in the vital Civil War years agreement always predominated between us.' Pursuing this theme, Trotsky declared that he had no wish to present his opponents in Russia with a new weapon by adopting a stance against Lenin's views on the workers' aristocracy. Once he had made it clear that, if only for tactical reasons, he did not wish to attack Lenin's position on this question, we abandoned the subject.

Today there is no such choice. We must look closely, in particular, at Lenin's conception of a revolutionary party, its relation to the class it strives to lead and the nature of the form of state which emerged from its victory. Above all, we must re-examine his conception of the status of the theory of such a party, its origin and the criteria for its validity.

'Marxism' in the Second International

Kautsky and 'Revisionism'

In 1889, the attempts to rebuild an international workers' organisation after the defeat of the Paris Commune finally bore fruit. This was six years after the death of Karl Marx, and 17 years after the International Workingmen's Association ('First International') had faded away.

By that time, the socialist movement included several mass organisations, of which the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) was the most significant. Of course, the most prominent figure in the 'Second International', as it became, was Frederick Engels. (I shall say more about him later.) But, from his death in 1895 until 1914, the SPD leaders gave the International its main direction.

That is how the outlook of Karl Kautsky (1854-1938), theoretical leader of the SPD, came to shape what became known as 'orthodox Marxism'. Kautsky placed great emphasis on the 'scientific' character of this orthodoxy. He saw the movement to socialism as being guaranteed by the operation of 'laws of history'. These resembled laws of nature, in that they operated independently of human will and consciousness. They applied universally and used human beings as their instruments. Their study was a science called 'historical materialism', or 'the materialist conception of history'.

Kautsky had already reduced *Capital* to a set of 'economic doctrines', completely unconnected with the idea of communism. He believed these doctrines showed how the economic expansion of capitalist production brought about both the development of technology and the growth and concentration of the proletariat. Armed with the scientific doctrines of 'Marxism', the 'Marxist Party' had the task of bringing the truth to the masses. The socialist intellectuals would teach scientific socialism to the workers.

For Kautsky, he and people like him had gained possession of this truth through the work of science, so it was not possible for lesser mortals to steer the same course. But he never doubted that the organised workers, under this leadership, would eventually form a force large enough and sufficiently organised to ensure the disappearance of capitalism.

This was Kautsky's 'Road to Power'. What he called the socialist revolution was to be a long, drawn-out affair, punctuated by 'political revolutions'. Socialism meant

chiefly that industry would come under the centralised control of the state, a state he envisaged as a form of advanced parliamentarism.

The SPD grew stronger, withstanding the years of Bismark's antisocialist laws and becoming an increasingly successful electoral force. Now, other trends became more vocal among its leaders. Edward Bernstein (1850-1932), while he was exiled in London, became enamoured of the Fabian ideas of gradualism. Together with some other proteges of Engels, he began to question the very basis of Kautsky's 'orthodoxy'.

In 1897, Bernstein announced that Kautsky's conception of socialist revolution — he called it Marx's — was now outmoded. Capitalism would be peacefully and gradually transformed into socialism. The theory of surplus value had been superseded. Dialectics was no more than mysticism, and materialism an old-fashioned prejudice. The movement towards socialism would get on better if it ditched Marx's 'Hegelianism' in favour of the 'return to Kant', so fashionable in academic circles at that time. To get socialist policies adopted in Germany, it would be necessary to form alliances with Liberal critics of the Empire.

Kautsky had the job of fighting off this attack on 'orthodoxy'. Fairly politely, and after some hesitation, he reaffirmed what he thought Marx had said about the development of capitalism leading to socialism. But Bernstein was only giving a theoretical voice to what many leading Social Democrat parliamentarians and trade union wheeler-dealers already silently believed. They cared nothing about theoretical niceties, as long as they could get on with the 'real' politics — and with their careers.

Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) spoke for a new and younger group of left-wingers. Her answer to Bernstein, *Social Reform or Revolution?*, went much deeper than Kautsky's. In it, she demonstrated brilliantly that 'revisionism' represented an opportunist adaptation to bourgeois society. But nowhere did she approach the philosophical basis of the problem. Indeed, in the vast output of books and articles which she contributed to the international movement she displayed little interest in such matters. The truth of Marxism was taken for granted as a body of doctrine by her as much as by Kautsky. And, as firmly as Kautsky, she thought that *Capital* was about the 'economic structure of capitalism'.

In the Tsarist Empire, a working class was developing, and with it an illegal but growing workers' movement. Georgi Plekhanov, in exile in Switzerland, had gathered around him a group of intellectuals who strove to build a socialist organisation, which claimed to be based on Marxism. Lenin, despite some

occasional organisational differences, founded his theoretical ideas on those of Plekhanov and Kautsky.

Plekhanov himself became a leading defender of 'orthodoxy' in the International, impatiently pressing Kautsky to step up his attacks on the philosophical foundations of Bernstein's 'revisionism'. Kautsky could not get anywhere near the core of Bernstein's attack. In a letter to Plekhanov in 1898 the theoretical leader of the International declared:

I have never been strong on philosophy. Although I stand entirely on the point of view of dialectical materialism, still I think that the economic and historical viewpoint of Marx and Engels is in the last resort compatible with neo-Kantianism.

For Plekhanov, Marx's materialism was crucial. We shall see later the huge distance which separated Plekhanov's 'orthodox' views from what Marx actually thought.

Philosophy and Bolshevism

Right from the start of the dispute in the International, Lenin and his comrades were firm supporters of Kautsky. It is true that the illegal organisations of Russian revolutionaries had little in common with the 'official' bodies of social democracy in the more advanced countries. But in their theoretical work, they never strayed far from the 'orthodox' leadership.

Among the Russian 'Marxists' trying to organise the illegal Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), Lenin was very keen on fighting the 'Economist' tendency which sought to elevate 'spontaneous' trade-union ('economic') struggles above all theory. Lenin connected this issue with the effort to replace the 'circle' spirit which dominated the illegal Marxist movement with an organisation of 'professional revolutionaries', which would be capable of mobilising the young Russian working class to lead the overthrow of Tsarism.

However, in the course of this fight, Lenin tied himself to the most extreme theoretical position he could find, as he often did, and this appeared most strongly in his book *What is to be Done?*, issued in 1902. Taking the ideas of his leader Kautsky only a bit further, he brought out their implications. He contended that Marxist theory cannot arise 'spontaneously' in the working class, but must be brought into the labour movement by bourgeois intellectuals, 'from without'.

The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, ie the

conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals. By their social status, the founders of modern socialism, Marx and Engels, belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia.

*The task of Social Democracy is to **combat spontaneity**, to **divert** the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social-Democracy.*

Nothing like this is to be found in the writings of Marx or Engels. All their lives, they fought against those who built sects which aimed to show the world what it should be like. Instead, they declared that communism was ‘the movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority’. Only the working class could achieve its own emancipation. While they would be supported in this job by people from every section of society, nobody could do it for them.

This gap between Marx and the ‘Marxists’ is inseparable from another. When Plekhanov drafted the Party Programme, he brought Marx’s formula ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ into it. But the Russian ‘Marxists’ read this phrase quite differently from anything Marx would have recognised.

Marx and Engels used the term precisely to distinguish themselves from the followers of the French revolutionary Auguste Blanqui (1809-1881). Blanqui spent his life plotting for a revolutionary ‘dictatorship’, to be exercised by a conspiratorial elite. The workers would hear about it later. In direct opposition to this, Marx and Engels argued that communism could only come about through the action of **the entire class of proletarians**, which in advanced countries was the mass of society. The state which oppressed the exploited on behalf of the exploiters would be destroyed and replaced, not by a new, ‘workers’ state’, but by a body which would at once begin to dissolve itself into the community. This is what Marx called ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’.

But the Russian revolutionaries, with the heroic tradition of ‘terrorism’ behind them, had to work illegally to organise a proletariat which was a small minority in an overwhelmingly peasant country. That is how ‘dictatorship’ to the Russian social democrats came to mean a form of state, whose apparatus was ‘unrestricted by laws’. It is clear that Plekhanov, at any rate, thought in terms of this apparatus in

the hands of a determined and benevolent minority. In 1902-3, the implications of this outlook were only beginning to be discussed.

The Second Congress of the RSDLP took place in 1903, only a few months after the editorial board of the newspaper *Iskra* — which included Plekhanov, Julius Martov (1873-1923) and Trotsky — had issued Lenin's book. Lenin's formulations in *What is to be Done?* were challenged. Instead of defending them literally, he declared:

Obviously, an episode in the struggle against economism has here been confused with a principled presentation of a major theoretical question, namely the formation of an ideology.... We all know that the 'economists' bent the stick in one direction. In order to straighten the stick it was necessary to bend it in the other direction, and that is what I did.

But by the end of the 1920s, a god-like Lenin was no longer allowed to be corrected on any topic, even by himself. These particular formulations in this particular book had become enshrined as fundamental theoretical principles.

Trotsky, for one, never accepted them. But, so great was the pressure of Stalinism, that, after 1917, he never said so in anything published in his lifetime. The statement about *What is to be Done?* which appears in his unfinished biography of Stalin, instead of being the starting-point for a development of understanding of the nature of revolutionary organisation, was always an embarrassment to Trotskyists. Indeed, in some Trotskyist groups, Lenin's position in *What is to be Done?* was made a fetish, central to their attitude to theory and organisation.

In the hands of the Stalinists, the idea of extreme centralism and 'revolutionary discipline' was used to justify the suppression of all criticism or even discussion. The very idea of a 'Party' was made into the fetish of fetishes, far removed from Marx's contention that the proletariat had to 'form itself into a party'.

Another episode at the 1903 Congress is also illuminating. Discussing the inclusion of the demand for universal suffrage in the Party Programme, a delegate named Posadovsky asked:

'Should all democratic principles be exclusively subordinated to the interests of our Party?'

To both applause and alarm, he answered his own question decisively in the affirmative. He was vigorously supported by Plekhanov:

Plekhanov: *If the elections turned out badly for us, we should have to try to disperse the resulting parliament not after two years, but, if possible, after two weeks.*

Applause. From some benches, hissing. Voices: 'You should not hiss!'

Plekhanov: *Why not? I strongly request the comrades not to restrain themselves.*

Although Lenin did not actually speak in this discussion, he was completely united with Plekhanov. As the split in the Iskra group revealed itself, Lenin and Plekhanov were at first lined up against Martov and Trotsky. Only in the following year did the division between 'Bolshevism' and 'Menshevism' begin to take its later shape, with Plekhanov as a leader of Menshevism and Trotsky outside both groups. (Plekhanov only began to criticise *What is to be Done?* three years after it had appeared.) Each faction, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, adopted both the centralised form of organisation and Plekhanov's 'dictatorship of the proletariat' conception.

It is worth contrasting the views of Plekhanov and Lenin at that time with those of Rosa Luxemburg. Following the 1905 Revolution in Russia, she had intervened in the discussion raging in the German Social Democratic Party with her pamphlet *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*.

The revolution, even when the proletariat, with the Social Democrats at their head, appear in the leading role, is not a manoeuvre of the proletariat in the open field, but a fight in the midst of the incessant crashing, displacing and crumbling of the social foundation. In short, in the mass strikes in Russia, spontaneity plays such a predominant part, not because the Russian proletariat are 'uneducated', but because revolutions do not allow anyone to play the schoolmaster with them.

From: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/smith-cyril/works/millenni/smith2.htm>

Course: Philosophy and Religion

18073a, Cyril Smith, How The Marxists Buried Marx, 1998, part 1

9311 words